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# LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS IN FRANCE.

BY WALTER B. SCAIFE.

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FRANCE being the only great European republic, its quadrennial election of its Chamber of Deputies can scarcely fail to interest Americans. That is in France the only national function of universal suffrage, as both the Senate and President are otherwise selected. In choosing his candidate, the French voter is placed in a much more difficult position than his American confrère. First, he has the embarrassment of more complicated sentiments and desires seeking political satisfaction; and, secondly, he has to select from a greater number of candidates, who represent as many shades of opinion, rather than two or three clearly defined policies. With an ardent desire for liberty, Frenchmen combine a strong hereditary instinct for a paternal government; they have established a republican form of legislation, while retaining a monarchical form of administration; they condemn monarchical extravagance and indulge in republican prodigality; and, instead of developing a self-government based on individual initiative and effort, they appear to cultivate more and more dependence upon the state. Under such circumstances, the voter's duty is plain, to weigh carefully and judge conscientiously among the numerous candidates and platforms offered to his choice. But, perhaps owing to the very difficulty and effort of choosing, the indifference manifested is great, and the proportion of non-voters disheartening, having reached almost thirty-three per cent. of those registered.

Before entering upon the details of the recent campaign and election, it may be well to recall a few general facts, a knowledge of which is necessary to the understanding of what is to follow. The Chamber of Deputies consists of 581 members, each elected by a *circonscription* or district. However, neither law nor custom

requires the deputy to be a resident of the district which he represents. Primaries and nominating conventions are equally unknown; as, practically, any voter of twenty-five years of age may nominate himself, simply by depositing with the proper authority, not less than five days before the date of election, a "duly legalized declaration" to that effect. Shortly before the election, every voter receives from the Government a "voter's ticket," containing his name, address and number in the public register, which ticket serves to identify him at the polls. In view of the simple method of nomination, the number of candidates easily becomes excessive, and the obtaining of an absolute majority vote impossible. Accordingly, two voting days are provided. If, on the first day, one of the candidates receives a majority of all votes cast, which at the same time is not less than one-fourth of the number of registered voters, the election is final. Otherwise, a second election, called *ballottage*, takes place two weeks later, on which occasion a plurality vote suffices.

As everybody is free to nominate himself, the list of more than 2,000 candidates includes men of every description—prince and peasant, millionaire and proletaire, employer and employed, doctor and lawyer, soldier and civilian; and a statistician of the curious reports among the candidates 17 hunchbacks, 3 one-armed men, 1 without legs, 94 lame, 12 stammerers, 6 deaf, 2 blind, 3 paralytic, 1 dwarf and 2 giants. Instead of party platforms, each candidate publishes his own "profession of faith," with the to us astonishing result that perhaps no two of them are identical. The variety of aims and promises exhibited by these documents seems to include every possible governmental policy, from an imperial *coup-d'état* to armed revolution, from monarchical monopoly to universal confiscation, from clerical absolutism to nihilistic anarchy. Furthermore, there is not wanting a certain ambiguity, not to say jugglery of words, in these candidatorial enunciations, and one writer at least contends that equivocation was the characteristic of the campaign. "Republican" has lost all definite signification, and is employed by men representing most diverse views of public policy; while "patriot" is equally appropriated as party watchword by monarchists and socialists. One of the former declares in his platform that France "is dying because of desertion of her traditions, and that the elective *régime* is killing her as it killed Poland." On the other

hand, the socialists contend that the only national balm is to be found in their doctrines.

One of the strangest phenomena of the recent campaign is the active part officially taken by the Roman Catholic Church. It had its candidates, its official organs, its professions of faith, its campaign fund, and its cheers of victory, like the other party organizations; and was especially directed against "the Jews and the Freemasons, these public poisoners." In its principal organ, *La Croix*, was published a list of contributions to its campaign fund, which reached the respectable sum of 165,000 francs; and this does not include the large sums said to have been personally expended by the rich and titled candidates of the Church. Even political sermons are alleged to have been preached from the pulpits, and the political posters of M. Turrel, Minister of Public Works, posted inside, as well as outside, the churches. Special prayers were offered, and special fasts and communions recommended to the faithful for the success of the cause; and I read in *La Croix* of May 26: "St. Michael and Joan of Arc have completed their work in our department and driven out all the radical and Freemason schismatics."

Another fact of the political struggle here strikes an American with peculiar force, and evokes surprise, not to say astonishment. We are accustomed to the sight of Masonic badges worn by thousands of men; Masonic funerals hardly awaken curiosity; and the triennial conclaves of the Knights Templar are welcomed by every city, without our ever associating the ideas of Masonry and politics. But here in France the stranger is not shown a Masonic temple as one of the architectural ornaments of the city, nor do I recall ever having observed a man wearing a Masonic badge. Moreover, there is no political party avowedly Masonic; and all that one learns of the order is from its enemies, who call the Masons the party of the "little chapel," in contradistinction to their own great cathedral. Yet the Masons are the constant object of attack, in the political articles of the monarchical and clerical press.

The programmes of all parties promised more or less extensive legislation tending to improve the lot of the masses, whose votes are necessary to election. It resembles an auction sale, where the bidding ran high, with this difference, however, that many of the bids were not taken seriously. Naturally, the socialists were the

most ardent in this movement, and their professions of faith advocated such extreme measures as repudiation of the national debt, government ownership of all natural monopolies, and the abolition of all taxes, to be replaced by a single progressive income tax, from which incomes of less than 2,500 or 3,000 francs were to be exempt. They, furthermore, demand pensions for old and disabled laborers; and the revision of the constitution in such form as either to suppress the Senate, or to have it elected by popular suffrage, or at least to subordinate it to the Chamber of Deputies.

The first ballot, that of May 8, having resulted in the election of 401 deputies, there remained 180 seats to be filled by the *ballottage*, with two weeks for the campaign. Now appears what, in the French practice, most nearly approaches party discipline. Every candidate leans either toward the Right or the Left in politics; that is, his sympathies are more or less conservative or radical, clerical or socialistic. The first election, having failed to give a majority vote to any one candidate, has nevertheless designated the respective favorites of the Right and Left, and, either by previous arrangement or by the force of public opinion, the other candidates are expected to withdraw from the *ballottage*, and to recommend their former supporters to vote for the candidate least inimical to their views. During this period of two weeks, the political fight waxes hotter and hotter, candidates and voters alike realizing that final victory or defeat for four years to come is at hand. If the voter cannot be represented precisely as he wishes, he will accept the best he can get, rather than let a man still farther from his views represent his district. This final party manœuvering explains a number of the late elections, which otherwise would be incomprehensible. Though a monarchical party still exists, it is no longer considered dangerous. But, on the other hand, the open entrance of the Catholic Church on the political arena has aroused its opponents to shout "clerical danger!" while the steady growth of the socialistic party has excited a real fear of collectivism. One of the telling campaign documents was a map of France showing the increase of the real estate holdings of religious congregations, from 800 million francs in 1881 to 2,000 millions in 1898; and affirming that their aggregate wealth reaches 10,000 millions. Hence, the non-clerical voters were called upon to oppose the Catholic party, and the state to con-

fiscate this wealth. On the other hand, the Catholic party demands that all the faithful vote for its candidates, who will work for the abolition of the laws governing education and religion, in order to remove all restraint on the activity and ambition of the Church. Accordingly, the liberals joined forces with the socialists, to resist the clericals; the conservatives went to their natural allies, in fear of the extreme socialist; and "clerical danger!" and "collectivist danger!" became the rallying cries around the respective standards, for the final election, May 22. Under such circumstances it may be easily understood how, for example, in a district where nearly every family possesses a patch of ground, a socialist was nevertheless elected by an overwhelming majority; and how, by contrast, some former socialistic strongholds were captured by clerical sympathizers, if not by extreme clerical candidates.

Aroused by Zola's attack on the army, another element appeared more strongly than hitherto, occasioned some hot disputes, and caused a number of candidates to assume the designation of Anti-Jews and Nationalists, who on May 8 drew out a vote of 233,000, or about three per cent. of the whole number of votes. The movement was especially strong in Algeria, where the Jews are numerous and where usury is said to reach the seemingly impossible figure of one hundred per cent. per month!

To an American observer, perhaps the strangest characteristic of the short campaign is its exclusively personal character. For, though each candidate has his committee to attend to printing, collecting campaign funds and organizing meetings, it is the candidate himself who is expected to do practically all the public speaking and writing of his own campaign. And M. Goblet having accepted the aid and support of some prominent party leaders, it was considered a grave political error, and is said to have added votes to the majority of his opponent. Not only must the candidate "develop his programme," *i. e.*, explain in detail his profession of faith, by a public talk in every hamlet and corner of his district, and promise to secure unlimited local and personal favors from the central government, but he must drink with the men and pay their drinks, flatter the women and kiss the babies. One man, called the Automobile Candidate, is reported to have addressed 106 reunions in ten days. The café is recognized "as both the club and parlor of the workingman," and the saloons as

“political and professional centres—centres which the candidate will assiduously frequent.” Here are held many of the campaign reunions, of which often only friends of the candidate are apprised, in order that the meeting may pass off quietly, and the candidate appear to have the unanimous support of the neighborhood, if not of the entire district. However, opposing candidates sometimes conduct a canvass of public debate; but experience proves the danger of such meetings ending in noisy confusion, if not in violence.

There remains perhaps the greatest of French methods of political propaganda—the poster. During the campaign, electoral placards are free of taxation, and the country is literally covered with posters, large and small and of many colors, with their manner of expression as varied as their character. While some are dignified appeals to reason and patriotism, others are farcical, and a few decidedly vulgar, although these last are not by any means confined to one party.

It is generally agreed that the French nation is advancing in its political education; and the republic seems to be an established fact, notwithstanding almost universal criticism, if not active discontent, in regard to it. However, family position and personal influence still count as moving factors in an election, and accusations of government pressure and the use of money are loud and numerous. But the recent campaign was, in fact, more a contest of principles and less a struggle of men for popular favor than its predecessors; and, with all its imperfections, it was, on the whole, conducted in a peaceable and businesslike manner. Hence, we may conclude that the people at large have shown themselves capable of self-government, based on self-restraint and the orderly expression of their political convictions. Whether the representatives they have chosen will prove themselves worthy and capable is an entirely different matter.

On election day the polls are open from eight in the morning till six in the evening; but, contrary to our system, the voting must take place in a room where the ballot box is on a table, round which it is possible for the public to circulate. The superintendence of the voting is in the hands of an electoral commission, in which the government and the various candidates are represented, and which is provided with a numbered list of the voters residing in the precinct. The voter presents his voter's card; his

number and name are read aloud and marked off on the list, and a corner is torn off the card to show that it has been used. His folded ballot is received by the president of the commission and deposited by him, without marking or examination, in the ballot box. As to the ballots, they must be white, and free from all distinguishing marks on the part visible when folded; otherwise, they may be either printed or written, and of any reasonable form and size.

At six o'clock the polls are declared closed, the double-locked ballot box opened in the presence of the public, and the ballots counted out, without examination, into large envelopes, one hundred to each, except the last. These envelopes, sealed, are then distributed to several tables, occupied by representatives of the different parties, who have been invited by the president of the electoral commission to assist in the counting, and have been provided with forms for recording the result. The counting is proceeded with at once; and blank, null and disputed ballots returned in a sealed envelope for final decision by governmental authority. From each table the partial count is reported to the commission, who then make up the vote of the precinct, which is declared to the waiting public and transmitted to the prefecture for revision four days later.

Among the surprises of the late election were the defeat of Jaurès, Guesde and Goblet, all recognized leaders of ability on the Left; the Government loss of Delpench, an assistant secretary, and André Lebou, the talented Minister of Colonies, and the conservative loss of Rochefoucauld, who has sat for many years among the deputies. All parties had individual gains, as well as losses, but the only party which really gained ground was the socialist. However, to a foreign observer, perhaps the greatest cause of surprise is that a thinker and writer of international reputation, like Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, should receive only 2,082 votes, and be distanced by a socialist with more than a thousand majority. What better illustration could be had of the fact that the people demand a representative who will voice their sentiments and vote as their delegate, rather than a representative who will think for them?

A curious fact is revealed by a study of this campaign and election—that, although the entire country expressed discontent with the present order of things at the opening of the campaign, the election did not create a Chamber essentially different

from its predecessor, which was admitted on all sides to be defective in many desirable qualities. More than two thousand years ago, Aristotle taught that democracy is necessarily a government of mediocrity; and modern politics constantly prove the accuracy of his judgment. How can it be expected that a government by the masses will rise to the intelligence of the few? A government of the masses certainly aims at the greatest good of the greatest number, for they are the greatest number. But this desideratum of modern state life is only reached in a roundabout fashion, *i. e.*, by the interaction of a large number of mediocre representatives instead of the directing intelligence of one or more great specialists. The latter form is no doubt capable of the highest development, but history has shown the almost unavoidable pitfalls to which it is subject; and, accordingly, modern tendency is toward a government by the people, which may not manifest the highest intelligence; but, on the other hand, will gradually elevate the intelligence and well-being of the masses, as none of the old systems has ever done. At least, such is the hope of all friends of republican rule; and it remains for the United States and France to prove to a skeptical world the possibilities of such a form of government.

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